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ABSTRACT

Multiculturalism has a place in basic communication courses. At a personal level, cross-cultural communication is concerned with the way a person chooses to treat another--it is a question of communication ethics, a subject that should be introduced in any basic communication course because communicators must consider how to deal fairly and effectively with people from other cultures in their daily lives. Most students have not thought of students from other campuses or other majors as being culturally different. However, on the campus of North Carolina State, the College of Engineering has a culture distinctly different from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences. It seems that many people engage in cross-cultural communication without realizing it--sometimes effectively, but more frequently not effectively. When communication instructors at North Carolina State talk about improving cultural communication among cultures, they discuss the importance and significance of listening; encoding and decoding; and other "basic" communication notions. The foundation of effective cross-cultural communication is based not upon something radically new or different, but fundamental communication concepts that have been taught for years. Students should realize that there are many career opportunities in cross-cultural communication. There are many corporations, government agencies, and other organizations that are establishing diversity programs and conducting mandatory workshops or role playing exercises for employees. Communication professionals are in demand as trainers, facilitators, teachers and consultants. (TB)

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The Importance of Incorporating Multiculturalism in Basic Communication Courses

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Abstract

This paper assesses the importance of including fundamentals of cross-cultural communication in basic communication courses. Cross-cultural communication and multiculturalism, a modern social movement, are not synonymous notions. Both concepts should be addressed in basic communication courses.

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NCSU's Basic Courses

First, I wish to explain what we mean by "basic communication course" at North Carolina State University. Our basic course is COM 190, Introduction to Communication, a three-credit-hour course, required of all entering students majoring in communication, no matter how they come to the department -- as freshmen, from other majors on campus, or from other colleges and universities.

The current text for this large lecture course is *Fundamentals of Human Communication* by DeFleur, Kearney, and Plax, which includes a chapter entitled "Communicating in a Multicultural Society."

We study our curriculum -- the requirements and the rationales. We look at careers in communication -- N. C. State's Career Planning and Placement Center conducts four-day career workshops to help COM 190 students in small groups establish career goals and to develop strategies to achieve those goals. We require all COM 190 students to undergo a communication competency screening performed by a speech-language therapist. Many of our faculty members appear as guest lecturers in COM 190 each semester.

Upon completion of this course, students should understand who we are, a bit more about who they are, what is expected of them, and we hope, of course, the fundamental principles, theories, practices, and issues related to human communication.

Public Speaking and Interpersonal Communication courses are also required of all students majoring in Communication at N. C. State, no matter their chosen concentration of study -- Mass Communication, Communication Disorders, Public and Interpersonal Communication, Public Relations, or Theatre.

Cross-cultural Communication is an Ethical and Practical Issue

At a personal level, cross-cultural communication is concerned with the way each of us chooses to treat other human beings -- it is a question of communication ethics, a subject that should be introduced in any basic communication course, for each of us must consider how to deal fairly and effectively with people from other cultures in our daily lives.

We teach that other cultures may be represented by folks quite different from us or very much like us. Most students have not thought of students from other campuses or other majors as being culturally different. On our campus, the College of Engineering has a culture distinctly different from our College of Humanities and Social Sciences. Those of us who communicate with engineering faculty and students (and faculty and students from other academic disciplines) are certainly engaging in cross-cultural communication.

It seems that many people engage in cross-cultural communication without realizing it -- sometimes effectively, but more frequently not effectively. Many of these individuals take communication for granted and never consider the importance of this human activity in their lives and careers. We think a basic communication course must emphasize the personal and professional utility of effective cross-cultural communication.

Every time we open our mouths or gesture to another human, both practical and ethical questions arise. The basic course is the place to get our students started in the study of this concept.

Cross-Cultural Communication is Basic

You may remember the posters distributed several years ago by the Speech Communication Association that read "Communication Is Basic." Cross-cultural communication is basic too, and so it should be covered in a basic course. When we talk about improving cultural communication between cultures, we discuss the importance and significance of listening; encoding and decoding; psychological and semantic noise, paralanguage, audience analysis, sharing idea systems, and other basic communication notions. The foundation of effective cross-cultural communication is based not upon something radically new or different, but the fundamental communication concepts we have taught in basic courses for many years.

Cross-Cultural Communication Means Jobs

Our students should be informed about career opportunities in cross-cultural communication. Students looking at possible careers in communication must learn that many corporations, government agencies, and other organizations are establishing valuing diversity programs and conducting mandatory workshops or role playing exercises for employees. Communication professionals are in demand as trainers, facilitators, teachers, and consultants by organizations attempting to deal effectively with increased cultural diversity in the work force (Griessman, 91-98). We must teach the skills required for these positions starting in the basic course.

Multiculturalism Issues

Something called "multiculturalism" is a major intellectual and public issue today. Several notable and popular books have recently been published on this subject. It seems the most prominent of these have been anti-multiculturalism works, the most sensational of which is William E. Henry's *In Defense of Elitism*, which is more of an attack on multiculturalism than a defense of anything (See also Bernstein, 1994). We read about this social movement in magazines, newspapers and other media. A literature search in our libraries seems to indicate that every scholar alive today and many who are now dead have had something to say about it.

But the term "multiculturalism" does not appear in DeFleur, Kearney and Plax's chapter "Communicating in a Multicultural Society." In fact, this term does not appear in most currently and widely adopted basic public speaking and interpersonal communication textbooks. One can find material in our basic texts on cross-cultural communication, ethnocentrism, and cultural diversity, but the term "multiculturalism" is not often seen. An exception to this is Samovar and Porter's new edition of *Communication Between Cultures*, which does include a substantial discussion on this topic but refers to the subject as "multicultural education" instead of "multiculturalism" (pp. 248-258).

Multiculturalists seek to increase cultural diversity in our society through more thorough inclusion of people from all manner of races, persuasions, and genders into our political and social processes. This process may require breaking traditions, changing standards, amending expectations that multiculturalists believe are culturally biased. Multiculturalism is a much broader and more volatile concept than cross-cultural communication. Multiculturalism's notions about the equivalency of cultures, the devaluation of linguistic standardization, what some believe is too

much emphasis on cultural differences and not enough emphasis on commonality and togetherness, and what others think is multiculturalism's promotion of egalitarianism at the expense of a quest for excellence have engendered lots of academic and public hell raising.

Many who would consider themselves liberal and certainly not racist or sexist may not agree with some tenets of multiculturalism. For example, one of my colleagues, unquestionably a liberal, was quite concerned recently because the school board in his community, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, heard and discussed a proposal to eliminate homework because homework -- not the content of the homework, but the homework activity itself -- is culturally biased. The proposal argued that some children who live in homes where education is not considered important and therefore not emphasized have no chance to compete with children from homes where homework is promoted as an important activity.

Many of us may agree with this position. Others would say problems of academic failure in our elementary and secondary schools are indeed serious, but should be addressed in other ways. The proposal, by the way, has garnered little support and is not likely to be enacted.

At the University of Virginia for about as long as anyone can remember assignments to the 54 dormitory rooms along either side of The Lawn near Thomas Jefferson's famous Rotunda have gone to traditional campus leaders -- the campus newspaper editor, student government leaders, honor committee members, etc., through a closed and rather mysterious process.

Recently, however, the room assignment process has been changed so that other students have the opportunity to live on The Lawn. The new process, which involves solicitation, advertising, and a lottery, was undertaken to insure that ". . . Lawn residents are a diverse group of students who represent widely varying activities, backgrounds, and interests" (Norfolk *Virginian-*

Pilot, March 20, 1994). Many at the University of Virginia and elsewhere are applauding this new openness. Others, however, look at this situation as an example of multiculturalism at its worst; a trashing of tradition and, worse, a promotion of egalitarianism over the rewarding of student academic leadership and achievement. This matter has generated editorials and letters to editors in newspapers across the state of Virginia.

I believe our students must study the positions of those who contribute to multiculturalism's national discussion and debate. In our basic Introduction to Communication course, we supplement our discussions on communication and culture with an examination of pro and con multiculturalism arguments. One source for these arguments in well-written but introductory form is a text in the Opposing Viewpoints Series from Greenhaven Press entitled *Culture Wars: Opposing Viewpoints*.

The message to students in our basic course is this: understanding how to communicate with people who are somehow different from us is a fundamental survival skill for our personal and professional lives. No matter how one may feel about controversial issues related to multiculturalism, one should be committed to the use of communication to increase human understanding and acceptance across cultural boundaries. Indeed, understanding and acceptance may naturally facilitate inclusion and diversity. We teach our students to respect differences between cultures and co-cultures while at the same time emphasizing the need to work together for common purposes.

Conclusion

Propelled in part by our modern specialized communication media that were supposed to bring us together, we are spawning more co-cultures in our society every day. Many of us, I think, are spending our lives in our own smal' cultural cubbyholes instead of sharing broad common experiences in spite of all the talk about our "global village." Our last truly common national experience, World War II, is now more than 50 years into the past. Today, effectively communicating with someone who lives down the street or down the hallway at work is likely to require application of cross-cultural communication principles. Communication with people from cultures with fundamental beliefs and practices that we find difficult to accept -- and with those who find our ways to be loathsome -- will become even more challenging in the future. The Success of our individual and national economy and security will depend on our personal ability and our nation's ability to deal effectively with cultural differences. This testimony suggests cross-cultural communication principles are important and fundamental, and should be an integral part of any basic communication course.

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